

**10-146-R + 11-130-R "Towards relating Maya and contemporary conceptions of cancer:
A transdisciplinary process to foster intercultural scientific exchange"**

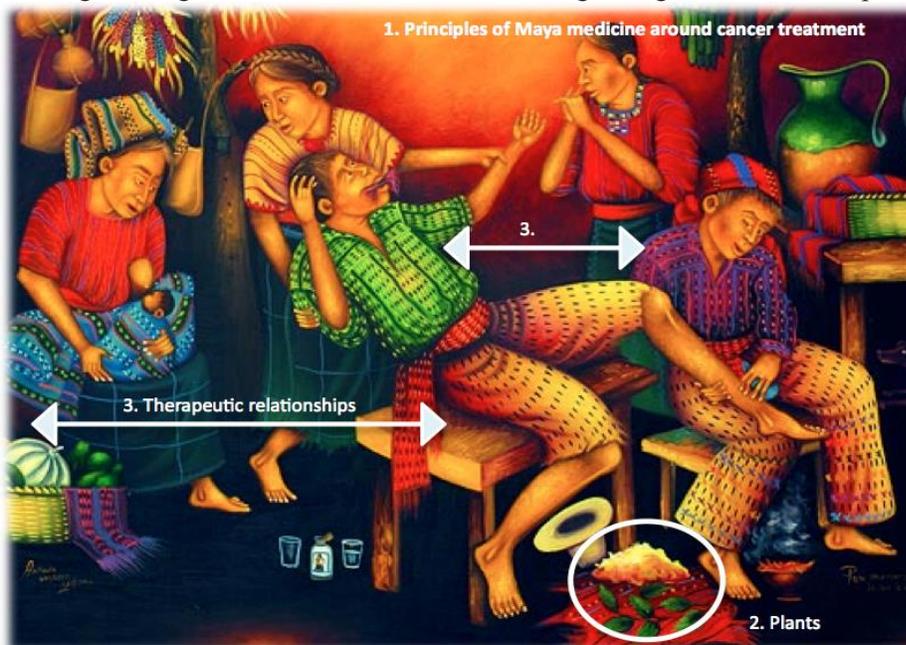
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Cancer represents a huge challenge for medical science, surpassing cardiovascular disease and accidents as the major cause of premature deaths. It affects all countries, age groups and economic sectors of society, and in developing countries is responsible for what has been called the "double burden", crippling public health services that are already overwhelmed by problems of infectious diseases. Given these social, economic and scientific complexities of cancer, there have been numerous attempts to find solutions through action-oriented and community-partnered approaches like transdisciplinarity. These projects seek to integrate the perspectives of diverse groups such as academics, government agencies, non-government organizations and community groups with a view to developing solutions that are acceptable to all involved. Some of these partnerships have included indigenous groups and representatives of diverse knowledge systems, though all too often the usefulness of this research has been limited by extreme power differentials among the collaborators.

This thesis describes the development and outcomes of a transdisciplinary research process conducted between indigenous Mayan medical specialists in Guatemala and Western-trained scientists and doctors. It forms part of a larger project entitled 'Maya and Contemporary Conceptions of Cancer' (MACOCC). The research is guided by two main questions:

1. How can both Mayan knowledge and medical oncology contribute to the conception and treatment of cancer?
2. What are possible and meaningful ways of relating these systems?

As a first step anthropological fieldwork in 67 Maya communities were conducted to reconstruct the medical knowledge of an equal number of Maya healers, followed by the facilitation of a validation and synthesis process within the Maya Council of Elders. Site visits in Guatemala and Zurich by representatives of both cultures provided spaces for knowledge exchange that was later analyzed. In addition to the primary goal of improving health care for the Mayan community, the results contribute to the longstanding debate of how to foster knowledge integration between epistemic systems.



The thesis consists of three main research articles. The first of these focuses on answering HOW a process can be run to bridge cultural barriers to promote scientific cooperation between extremely diverse epistemic systems. The second paper focuses on WHAT the research reveals concerning the discipline-based topic of cancer, what was learned about the problem framed at the onset of the collaborative research

agenda. The third paper presents a case for answering WHAT this process is USEFUL FOR, demonstrating how interdisciplinary analysis of the content allowed to correlate findings regarding the relational aspects of Maya therapy, to the mismatch in current service provision in the public health system of Guatemala.

